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ABSTRACT

Although Montessori parents recognize the importance of early second-language acquisition and would like to help their children obtain these skills, they often lack the knowledge that would enable them to take an active role in supporting such learning. The staff of the Montessori Center of Nyack, New York, devised three simple ways to bring families into the school's Spanish-language learning process with a minimum expense. The parent involvement program presented at the Center offers very different, but equally effective means for Spanish to be incorporated into the students' homes. Parents are encouraged to participate in all three of the activities, but could choose just one or two and still have a positive impact on their child's learning. The activities are: (1) an introductory Spanish conversation course for parents; (2) prerecorded language-tutor tapes accessible by phone; and (3) a library of instructional resources parents could use at home. (HTH)

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Preschool Second-Language Acquisition:
A Parent Involvement Program to Reinforce Classroom Learning

Families seeking Montessori education have historically been very interested in the educational aspects of their children's development. Parental involvement in preschool activities such as reading and math is relatively easy to achieve since adults have had some exposure to these disciplines. Reinforcing the learning that occurs during the French or Spanish lesson, however, will be problematic if no one in the family speaks those languages. Although they recognize the importance of early second-language acquisition and would like to help their children obtain these skills, parents often lack the knowledge that would enable them to take an active role in supporting such learning.

To provide children with a seamless educational experience, parents and teachers must work together to create links between the home and school environments. The gap that exists in the second-language acquisition process requires such a bridge. The staff of the Montessori Center of Nyack devised three simple ways to incorporate families into the school's Spanish language learning process with a minimum of time and expense.

The parent involvement program presented at the Center offered very different, but equally effective means for Spanish to be transitioned into students' homes. The individual components were designed to appeal to diverse learning and life styles, as well as varied timeframes of the busy families of the 21st century. Although they were encouraged to participate in all of the activities, parents could choose just one or two interventions and still have a positive impact on their child's second language learning.

1. *Introductory Spanish conversation course.*

To provide meaningful support for their child's second-language learning, parents could obtain a basic level of competence in the language being offered. To accomplish this, they were invited to participate in a one-session course in Spanish conversation. The program, which focused on the verbal essentials of the foreign language, was offered at different times and dates immediately following the opening of the new school year and was available to all adult family members at no charge. The classes presented language learning in an informal, relaxed environment using songs, games, and other media as teaching tools. The techniques employed to introduce such learning mirrored the methods used in classroom

presentations to the children. The vocabulary was based on the preschool curriculum.

A typical session began with parents learning elementary Spanish phrases such as "me llamo es..." (my name is ...) and "¿Cómo se llama usted?" (What is your name?) The teacher had the adults introduce themselves to each other as the children do at circle time. The instructor then modified the lesson format to make it more relevant and entertaining for adults. For example, the children learn the names of the numbers (uno, 1; dos, 2; tres, 3, etc.). Adults were taught the same numbers but were also given phrases to perform basic addition and subtraction problems (2 y 2 son 4; 15 menos 2 son 13). They were then asked to present and solve simple problems using the Spanish numbers they had just learned. The exercise was done in a non-threatening and informal atmosphere. Suggestions for remedial adult math classes were in abundance. The class was presented in a manner that would encourage socializing among families and emphasize the enjoyable aspects of language learning. The refreshments served became teaching tools to help parents learn the names of fruits and vegetables.

By the close of the session, parents had been exposed to the same words and phrases, songs and activities that their children would be learning during that semester. This shared knowledge enabled them to provide a home environment where a more spontaneous acquisition the foreign language could occur.

In addition to providing a baseline of language knowledge, the sessions gave families the opportunity to meet and converse with other parents, the children's Spanish instructor and other classroom teachers to discuss various aspects of second language learning in the home. The conversation course provided a vehicle for parents to explore their shared experiences. As Swick notes, "the partnership construct is based on the premise that collaborating partners have some common basis for action and a sense of mutuality that supports their joint ventures. Teachers and parents have a common need for joining together in partnership: the need to foster positive growth in children and in themselves" (Swick, 1992, p. 5).

The conversation course was intentionally limited to one session. Research indicates that "programs with extensive parent training components do not produce higher student achievement than those with only basic training, and they sometimes experience considerable attrition--presumably because their time and effort requirements overtax the willingness of parents to stay involved" (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989, p. 3).

Questionnaires completed at the end of the two separate course offerings reflected an overall satisfaction with the content and delivery. Although the amount of factual information presented during the one session event was limited, the conversation course afforded families some fluency in Spanish. Because language acquisition is essentially a social phenomenon, parents' ability to use even limited amounts of Spanish with their children outside the school environment could provide the social context that Wiener (1988) emphasized as critical for such learning to occur. Months following the initial presentations, parents who attended the sessions were still consistently greeting the administrator and the Spanish instructor with a cheerful "hola" and "buenos días".

2. *Language tutor.*

Second-language instruction at the Montessori Center of Nyack was also supported through the use of prerecorded Spanish lessons available via a telephone service. Parents wishing to review the vocabulary or check pronunciation could call a special number where an answering machine provided the words in both English and Spanish. Children were encouraged to listen to their teacher reiterate the classroom lesson. The concept of a telephone hotline has been employed for the past decade by the Berlitz "Language for Kids" program.

The Spanish instructor updated the tapes bimonthly and provided printed copies of vocabulary lists to parents as well. Each lesson began with the same greeting presented by the instructor. "Hola and welcome to the Spanish telephone tutoring service at the Montessori Center of Nyack. For this lesson, I will say the word in English and then three times in Spanish. Listen when I say the word for the first time in Spanish and then try to say it after me when I repeat it. Let's begin. Vamos a empezar."

Parents were provided with a schedule of lessons and dates. Vocabulary lists were also distributed to enable parents to check the phonetic pronunciation of each Spanish word and to expand the basic lessons with additional concepts if desired.

The Spanish instructor used a speaker phone to introduce the children to the concept of a telephone tutor during their regular classroom lesson. The interactive format enabled students to hear their teacher's voice and practice repeating the Spanish words as suggested by the tape. Through in-class practice they became more comfortable with the set-up and presentation.

While the telephone tutor could be used to review and supplement Spanish classroom presentations, it was also helpful for children who had been absent due to illness or other circumstances. The length of time, repetition, and exposure to a second language has a decided impact upon comprehension and fluency (Curtain & Pisola, 1994, McLaughlin, 1992). Easily accessed, the telephone support line offered a convenient way to reiterate and recreate classroom lessons at home. For a practical demonstration, call the Center's telephone tutor at 1-845-348-1133.

3. Instructional resource library.

Working collaboratively, the Center's administrator and the Spanish instructor created a library of Spanish resources for families to use at home. Acting upon suggestions from parents and other educators as well as individual research through the internet, they acquired and catalogued a total of 87 books, tapes, videos, audiotapes, computer programs, and CDs. Parents were encouraged to borrow these resources to share with their children.

The library contains books written entirely in Spanish, books in both English and Spanish, and paired books with one copy in English and the other in Spanish. A collection of contemporary literature offers students the ability to reflect upon "current issues and surroundings encountered by children in countries in which the target language is spoken" (Pesola, 1991, p. 340). As Pisola also notes, culturally appropriate illustrations can add a significant dimension to such understanding (1991, p. 340). Spanish cookbooks with simple recipes provide families with other concrete ways to promote cultural connections (Rettig, 1995, p. 6).

The videotape collection consists of popular animated stories, such as La gallinita roja or The Little Red Hen, with Spanish dialogue and learning tapes, such as First Fun with Spanish and Muzzy, the popular British Broadcasting Corporation's language program. The audiotapes and CDs of songs are designed to facilitate Spanish linguistic acquisition and cultural appreciation in yet another media. As Montessori acknowledged, "children's songs are also a good means for obtaining exact pronunciation" (1965, p. 124). The computer programs are mainly for adult and child cooperative second-language learning.

The Center's library is designed to fill a void left by the local public facility that has only limited resources for adults in Spanish and none for children. Spanish resource items, appropriately labeled and coded with

pocket cards and return date slips, may be borrowed for four week intervals.

Families are also encouraged to establish their own permanent collections of resource materials. During the Center's annual fall book sale, a major children's book publisher with a local warehouse provided a generous assortment of modestly priced Spanish books for youndgchildren. Sales reflected the level of interest expressed by parents.

In addition to the introductory publicity afforded to all aspects of the parent involvement program, the resource library was discussed at Spanish conversation courses and in the Center's newsletters. Fliers were posted and individual notices were sent home with each child. The library, attractively displayed on a revolving four-sided bookcase and identified by an inviting sign, was placed adjacent to the test classroom. A wall-mounted Plexiglas display rack provided easy viewing of the bilingual picture books.

Conclusion:

Research supports the cognitive advantages of early second-language acquisition, confirms that affective variables contribute to the learning process, and verifies that parental involvement contributes to children's academic success. "Every family functions as a learning environment, regardless of income level, structure, or ethnic or cultural background. In this respect, every family has the potential to support and improve the academic achievement of its children" (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997, p. 14). The creation of a flexible and varied family-school partnership for second-language learning at the Montessori Center of Nyack provided students who are at an ideal age to participate in such learning with the optimal environment in which to achieve proficiency while enabling parents to have access to home-based activities that were in concert with their schedules, learning styles, and interests.

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